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SUBJECT: The River of Life?: Mass Swimathon in Guangzhou's
Pearl River

REF: A) Guangzhou 21212; B) Guangzhou 21192; C) Guangzhou 93

(U) This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please
handle accordingly.

¶1. (U) Summary: In a public display that harks back to the
Mao era, 3,500 Guangdong officials and local residents swam
across the Pearl River to promote environmental clean-up
efforts. Though Guangzhou is spending vast sums of money on
waste-water treatment plants, and is clamping down on highly
polluting factories, China's own pollution index rates the
water as unsafe for swimming. In a last-minute attempt to
clean up the water, cities upstream were ordered to stop
dumping sewage into the river prior to the event. The event
was hailed by the Chinese press as a success, while the Hong
Kong press noted the absurdity of a mass swim in a river
that is harmful to humans.

Whose Idea Was This?

¶2. (U) The Pearl River swimathon was first proposed by Li
Changchun, former Guangdong party secretary and now, as
Standing Committee member of the Politburo, one of China's
most influential leaders. In 2001, while he was still in
Guangdong, Li stated his hope that the Pearl River would be
clean enough for swimming within five years. Li reportedly
continued to follow up on the idea after he left Guangdong,
asking local officials about the swim during their visits to
Beijing. In 2002, then-Guangzhou party leader Huang Huahua
-- now Guangdong governor -- stated that the river would be
clean enough for swimming in 2005. It was former Guangzhou
party leader Lin Shusen -- recently promoted to acting
governor of Guizhou -- who finally organized the swim. He
was also the first to jump in the water during a trial run a
few days before the event.

¶3. (U) Large-scale public swims first became popular in
China during the leadership of Mao Zedong, who swam in the
Pearl River several times in the 1950s and made a much-
publicized crossing of the Yangzi River in 1966. Between
1967 and 1977, six more Yangzi River swims were organized to
honor Mao, peaking with a 16,000-person swimathon in 1977.
Since then, however, the practice had fallen to the wayside,
and no large-scale swims have taken place.

(Don't) Take Me to the River

¶4. (U) Approximately 3,500 people, mostly employees of

government agencies or state-owned companies, participated in the July 13 swimathon. The highest ranking officials were Guangdong Governor Huang Huahua, Guangzhou Mayor Zhang Guangning, and four Guangzhou vice mayors. Other citizens, including neighborhood groups and students of all ages, participated after being vetted by authorities. Most wore Speedo-style suits, swim caps, and goggles and swam with the assistance of brightly colored flotation devices strapped to their limbs. Originally, press reports said 10,000 people would participate, but in the days leading up to the event the number was scaled down. This owes in part to the decision to make participation by some local universities voluntary instead of required.

Bridge Over Troubled Water

¶15. (U) The river banks, viewing areas, and bridges near the event were adorned with slogan-bearing banners trumpeting patriotism and the "mother river." Several banners had even been mounted on large floating buoys and were pulled along by groups of swimmers during their crossings. The local press reported that twenty scuba divers swam underwater throughout the event. Police roped off the area where the swimmers entered and exited the river, and access was closely monitored. A sizable force of boats patrolled the river, both to assist in case of emergency and to remove any "suspended matter" from the water. To ensure that the river was as clean as possible, Guangzhou, along with the upriver cities of Foshan and Qingyuan, were required to stop dumping sewage into the river in the days leading up to the event. Numerous boats were tasked during the week before the event to lift large debris from the river.

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River Deep, Pollution Level High

¶16. (U) Pollution in the Pearl River is a combination of sewage and industrial waste such as ammonia nitrogen and phosphorus. According to press reports, approximately 30 percent of sewage in Guangzhou is untreated. Nevertheless, the city has made major efforts to clean up the river in recent years: it has spent almost USD one billion to build new sewage networks and wastewater treatment plants and has pledged to spend more than USD two billion more. It has also ordered most of the highly polluting factories to leave -- though many have relocated to northern Guangdong, along waterways that feed into the Pearl River (see reftels A and B). Indeed, in December 2005, a smelting factory in northern Guangdong discharged 1,000 tons of cadmium-carrying waste into the river during facility maintenance, some of which made its way through Guangzhou (see reftel C).

¶17. (U) Guangzhou papers have reported in the past that the Pearl River around Guangzhou was "95 percent heavily polluted" and "5 percent lightly polluted". According to China's national water quality index, in which "1" is clean and "5" is highly polluted, swimming water must meet grade "3". Guangzhou's Pearl River usually ranges between "4" and "5". However, a vice mayor insisted that emergency clean-up efforts in the two weeks prior to the swimathon lowered the water quality level to "3".

Pearl River Delta Blues

¶18. (U) Local press provided extensive coverage of the swim, including a live broadcast during the actual event. Local coverage was overwhelmingly positive, with photos and quotations from triumphant swimmers. One local paper, however, cited a local dermatologist who warned people with open wounds to avoid participating. The Hong Kong press clearly relished the opportunity to ridicule the event, with the South China Morning Post pairing photos of filthy

waterways with jubilant swimmers. It also reported on a prominent local businesswoman who tested the waters herself before the swim and said she saw floating household waste and felt sticky when she got out. She later came down with diarrhea and an eye infection. Every swimmer we spoke to after the event was unabashedly positive about the state of the river. One local police officer told us "the water is perfect now."

Comment: Stink or Swim?

19. (SBU) This event was an interesting throwback to an earlier era. If the idea had not originated with a powerful figure such as Li Changchun, it seems doubtful it would have ever made it past the drawing board. Nevertheless, Guangzhou has made real efforts to clean up the river and has had some success -- Governor Huang was quoted as saying the water was "no longer thick and smelly." And if the ultimate goal of the swimathon was to raise the environmental awareness of Guangzhou citizens, with the aim of protecting the city's primary water source, it was a resounding success.

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